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ABSTRACT

This study examined first- to second-semester persistence of first-time, full-time college freshmen at a public four-year institution, focusing on Tinto's (1993) concept of separation. Data were collected from 689 first-time, full-time freshmen using the Cooperative Institutional Research Program 1995 Student Information Form, and from 411 students at the midpoint of the fall 1995 semester using the First Semester Collegiate Experiences Survey. Enrollment data for the spring 1996 semester were also collected for the latter group of 411 students. Path analysis indicated that female students, white students, students from higher income families, and students with higher high school academic achievement received more support for college attendance and were less likely to perceive the need to reject past attitudes and values in order to remain in college than did their peers. In turn, it was found that support and the perceived need to reject past attitudes and values positively influenced first- to second-semester persistence. The results suggest that students who successfully pass through the stage of separation are more likely to return to college for their second semester. (Contains 25 references.) (MDM)

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Tinto's Separation Stage and Its Influence on First-Semester College Student Persistence

Susan A. Elkins

Director of Extended Education

Tennessee Technological University

Box 5073

Cookeville, TN 38505

(931) 372-3394

John M. Braxton

Associate Professor of Education

Vanderbilt University

Peabody College

Box 514

Nashville, TN 37203

(615) 322-8000

Glenn W. James

Director of Institutional Research

Tennessee Technological University

Box 5202

Cookeville, TN 38505

(931) 372-6144

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Dolores Vura
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Tinto's Separation Stage and Its Influence on First-Semester College Student Persistence

Examination of student departure for various student populations, in different institutional settings, and at various stages in time is crucial in the quest to improve retention (Tinto, 1993). Therefore, this study explored first- to second-semester persistence of first-time, full-time freshmen at a public, four-year institution, focusing upon Tinto's concept of separation. The question of how various underlying dimensions of separation influence departure decisions was examined. The dimensions of (a) support and (b) rejection of attitudes and values were found to influence persistence in a statistically significant way.

Tinto's Separation Stage and Its Influence on First-Semester College Student Persistence

The goal of enhanced student retention has become a focus of higher education institutions nationwide. High attrition rates, coupled with the changing demographics of higher education (Levine, 1989), have led to the need for institutions to focus on the number of students they retain to maintain enrollments (Braxton, Brier, & Hossler, 1988; Levine, 1989; Tinto, 1993; Zusman, 1994). Therefore, examination of student departure for various student populations, in different institutional settings, and at various stages in time is crucial in the quest to improve retention rates (Tinto, 1993). Persistence during the first year and the first semester in particular looms important to scholars and practitioners, because approximately three fourths of all dropouts leave at some time during the first year (Tinto, 1987). Some observers also note that many of these individuals who drop out leave during the first six weeks of the fall term (Blanc, Debuhr, and Martin, 1983; Tinto, 1988). Tinto also posits that the forces shaping student departure during the first six months are qualitatively different from those forces at later times.

To account for the early stages of student departure, Tinto (1987, 1993) advanced three separate stages that students move through in the establishment of membership in the communities of a college or university. These stages are separation, transition, and incorporation. Separation, the first stage, is the disassociation from one's previous communities, and it offers an explanation for why some students depart during their first semester of college. However, the effects of separation on persistence have received little empirical attention. Consequently, this study seeks to determine the influence of separation on first- to second-semester student departure decisions. An understanding of the influence of separation on early first-year student departure would contribute not only to the understanding of college student departure in general but also to the development of policies and programs designed to reduce first-semester student departure.

Theoretical Framework

Tinto drew from the work of the early 20th century Dutch anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep's developmental theory of the way individuals move from one period of life to the next through three stages: separation, transition, and incorporation. Van Gennep posited that separation from the former environment is

viewed as the first step in a successful movement, followed by a transitional period and a stage of incorporation (Boyle, 1989), which denotes full integration and acceptance. Tinto (1987) contended that the process of student persistence is similar to that of becoming incorporated into the life of human communities, a process that is usually marked by similar stages of passage to those which students must typically pass through in order to persist in college. The result of unsuccessful negotiation of this process is that the individual fails to become integrated into the intellectual and/or social fabric of the institution (Boyle, 1989), resulting in the parallel to Durkheim's concept of suicide: departure from the institution (Tinto, 1975).

Of the three stages, separation is the focus of this study. Students enter college with various characteristics -- gender, race, academic aptitude, academic achievements, family socioeconomic background, and parent educational levels -- and different levels of initial commitment to the institution (Tinto, 1975, 1987). These characteristics and the initial level of institutional commitment influence the passage of students through the separation stage. Separation occurs prior to and at the outset of the institutional experiences in both the academic and social systems. As students enter college, they are required to disassociate to some extent from membership in communities of the past, such as families, friends, the local high school, and local areas of residence. This separation constitutes the first stage of passage into the college career and may require some personal transformation and possibly rejection of the norms of past communities.

Separation may be particularly difficult for individuals whose past communities seriously question the value of college attendance (Tinto, 1987, 1993). If a student fails to receive the support for college attendance from friends and family members, then early departure from college is likely. Student entry characteristics and the initial level of institutional commitment affect in varying degrees the support for college attendance that students receive. Moreover, some students may perceive that it is necessary for them to reject the values of their high school friends and family to remain at their chosen college (Tinto, 1987, 1993). Students willing to reject the values of their past communities are more likely to persist from the first to second semester of their first year in college. Student entry characteristics and the initial level of commitment to the institution impact

the need of students to reject the attitudes and values of their past communities to remain enrolled at their chosen college or university.

Following successful negotiation of the separation stage, students experience the stages of transition and incorporation, which ultimately influence the student departure decision (Tinto, 1993). These formulations are displayed in Figure 1.

Methods and Data Sources

The site of this study was a public, four-year institution with enrollment of approximately 8,000 students and moderate selectivity in admission criteria. A longitudinal, panel design was employed with three data collections during the 1995-96 academic year. First, background data were collected from first-time, full-time freshmen using the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) 1995 Student Information Form. Of the 1,134 students, responses from 689, or 61%, were usable. For the second data collection, an instrument was developed to focus upon possible dimensions of separation as defined by Tinto (1987, 1988, 1993). The instrument, entitled First Semester Collegiate Experiences Survey (FSCES), consisted of items that were derived from Tinto's formulations about separation (Elkins, 1996). The FSCES instrument was administered at the midpoint of the fall semester through required freshman physical education courses, resulting in a response rate of 411, or 60%, of the respondents from the first data collection.

Chi-square goodness-of-fit tests indicated that the 411 respondents were representative of the freshman population from which they were drawn, with respect to gender and race. However, the chi-square statistic did indicate a significant difference regarding age at the .05 level. The sample of students was not representative regarding the nontraditional, older students, because 95.8% of the 411 respondents were in the traditional 18- to 19-year-old age range. This resulted in a more homogenous panel and was not seen as a limitation of this study.

Additionally, t-test results indicated that the sample appeared to be slightly biased toward those with higher ACT Composite scores. The lack of representativeness of the survey panel regarding academic aptitude as measured by ACT Composite scores is clearly a limitation of this study.

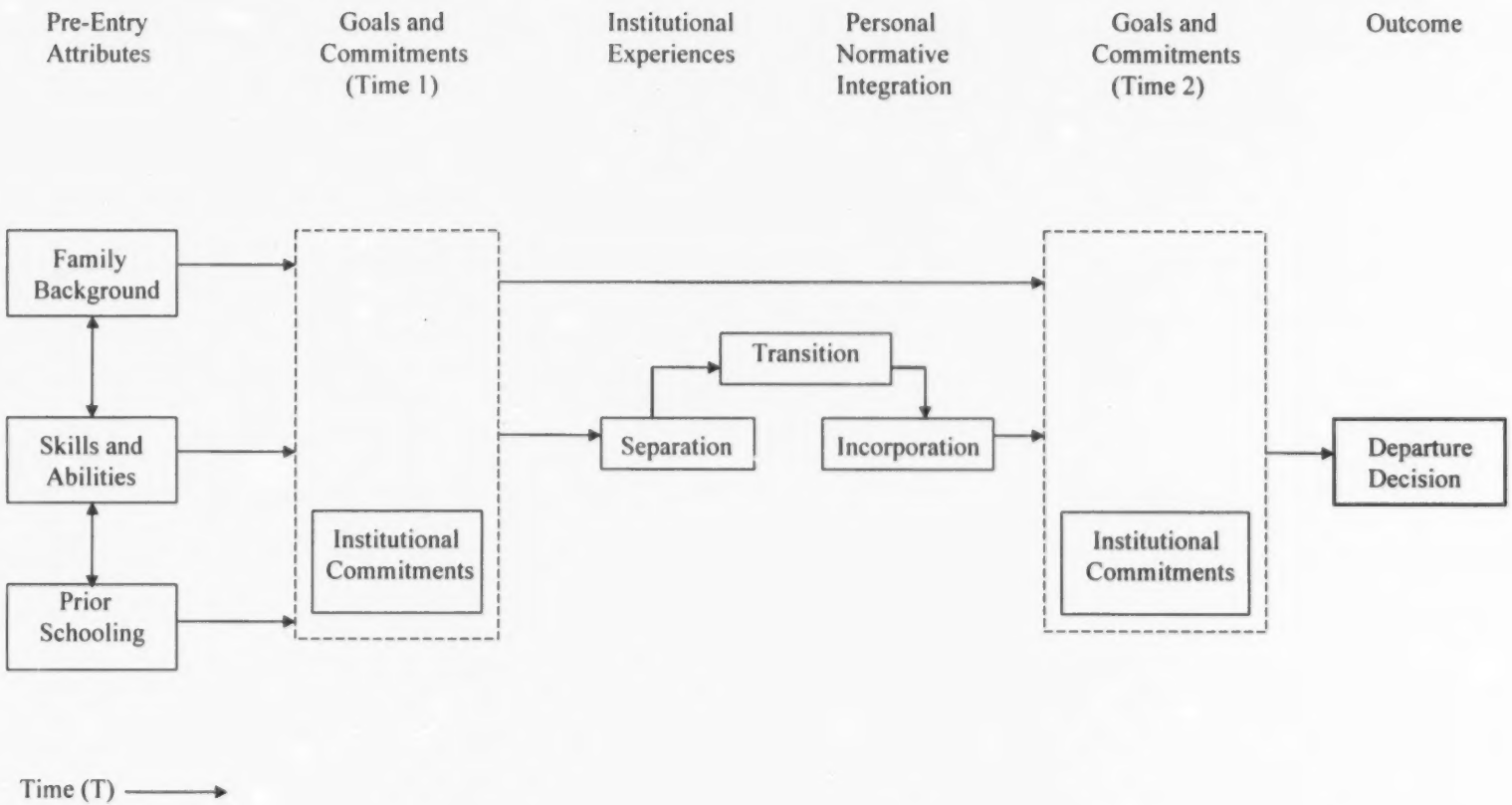

Figure 1. Tested portion of the Tinto model in relation to Van Gennep's stages of passage.

The final data collection was conducted by reviewing university records of the 411 students in the panel at the end of the spring semester registration period in January 1996. The purpose of this data collection was to determine if the students in the panel had continued their enrollment or departed from the university.

Variables

Four sets of variables were used to test these formulations: (1) student pre-entry characteristics, (2) initial institutional commitment, (3) separation, and (4) first- to second-semester persistence. The pre-entry characteristics examined were academic aptitude, high school academic achievement, gender, parent income, race, and parent educational level. The variables that are operationalized in the separation stage are (a) support and (b) rejection of attitudes and values, as shown in Table 1.

Statistical Design

Simple descriptive statistics were generated for the variables. Means and standard deviations are displayed in Table 2. Path analysis was the statistical approach used to test the formulations displayed in Figure 1. Before the path analysis was conducted, the correlations of the variables were inspected for multicollinearity. These correlations are presented in Table 3 and indicate that high multicollinearity was not present.

The six student entry characteristics and initial institutional commitment constituted the exogenous variables. The endogenous variables were support, rejection of attitudes and values, and first- to second-semester persistence. Support and rejection of attitudes and values were the indices of separation in this study. Three structural equations were estimated by regressing each of the three endogenous variables on the six student entry characteristics and initial institutional commitment. Both direct and indirect effects of these variables were estimated using GEMINI (Wolfle and Ethington, 1985), a FORTRAN-based program developed from the formulations of Sobel (1982). The .05 level of significance was used for identifying both statistically reliable direct and indirect effects. For Tinto's separation stage, Table 4 displays the structural parameter estimates (equations) derived from the path analysis in this study.

Table 1

Listing and Definition of Variables

Variable	Definition
Pre-entry characteristics	
1. Gender	Student gender coded male = 1, female = 2 (CIRP item 1)
2. Race	Students recoded as White/Caucasian = 2, Other Nonwhite = 1 (CIRP item 20)
3. Parent income	Parental income, less than $6,000 = 1, $200,000 or more = 14 (CIRP item 26)
4. Parent education	Education levels of both mother and father, postsecondary or less = 1, post-secondary school other than college or less = 1, some college to graduate degree for either father or mother = 2 (CIRP item 25 recoded)
5. Academic aptitude	ACT composite scores (CIRP item 7)
6. High school academic achievement	High school average grade, 1 = D to 8 = A or A+ (CIRP item 6)
Institutional Commitment (Time 1)	
1. Initial institutional commitment	Is this college your first choice? First = 4, less than third = 1 (CIRP item 13)
Separation	
1. Support	Composite of 12 survey items: 1) "When I talk with other family members about my college experiences at the University, I feel . . ."

2) "When I talk with my friends who attend(ed) college about my experiences at the University, I feel . . . "
3) "When I talk with my friends who do not/have not attended(ed) college about my college experiences at the University, I feel . . . "
4) "When I talk with my romantic partner/spouse about my experiences at the University, I feel . . ."

(FSCES items 22-25, 1 = Depressed; 5 = Happy)

5) "My parents are supportive of my decision to attend college."
6) "My friends who attend(ed) college are supportive of my decision to attend college."
7) "My friends who did not/do not attend college are supportive of my decision to attend college."
8) "My parents are supportive of my decision to attend the University."
9) "Other family members are supportive of my decision to attend the University."
10) "My friends who attend(ed) college are supportive of my decision to attend the University."
11) "My friends who did not/do not attend college are supportive of my decision to attend the University."
12) "I feel as if I will succeed here."

(FSCES items 26, 29-32, 34-36; 1 = Disagree Strongly, 5 = Agree Strongly)

Cronbach Alpha = .88

2. Need to reject past attitudes and values	Composite of 5 survey items: 1) "In order to stay at the University, I may have to reject attitudes and values of my parents." 2) "In order to stay at the University, I may have to reject attitudes and values of my romantic partner/spouse." 3) "In order to stay at the University, I may have to reject attitudes and values of my friends who attend(ed) college." 4) "In order to stay at the University, I may have to reject attitudes and values of my friends who do not/have not attended(ed) college." 5) "It is troubling to me that in order to stay at the University, I may have to reject the attitudes and value of my family members." (FSCES items 47, 49, 50, 51, 53; 1 = Disagree Strongly, 5 = Agree Strongly) Cronbach Alpha = .85
First- to second-semester persistence	Spring semester 1996 registration data: Persist = 2, Department = 1 (Institutional records)

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations

Variables	M	SD
Gender	1.493	.501
Race	1.937	.244
Parent income	8.274	2.555
Parent education	1.708	.455
Academic aptitude	23.679	3.761
High school academic achievement	5.980	1.675
Initial institutional commitment	3.836	.420
Support	51.092	6.557
Need to reject past attitudes & values	9.807	4.411
First- to second-semester persistence	1.922	.269

Table 3

Correlations Among Variables

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1. GENDER	1.0000									
2. RACE	.0963	1.0000								
3. PARINCOME	-.1207**	.0848	1.0000							
4. PAREDUC	-.1810**	-.0350	.3551**	1.0000						
5. ACADAPT	-.1738**	.1453**	.0832	.1145*	1.0000					
6. HSACHIEVE	.1272**	.0627	-.0527	-.0331	.5050**	1.0000				
7. INSTCOMM	-.0018	.0177	.0114	-.0833	.0190	.0884	1.0000			
8. SUPPORT	.1354*	.2041**	.0616	.0014	.0959	.1677**	.0094	1.0000		
9. NREJAV	-.1965**	-.1248*	.0693	.0460	-.0479	-.1110*	.0764	-.3864**	1.0000	
10. PERSIST	-.0414	-.0384	.0161	.0726	.0900	.1762**	.0162	.2479**	.0087	1.0000

Notes. PARINCOME = Parent income; PAREDUC = Parent education; ACADAPT = Academic aptitude; HSACHIEVE = High school academic achievement; INSTCOMM = Initial institutional commitment; NREJAV = Need to reject attitudes and values; PERSIST = First- to second-semester persistence.

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

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Table 4

Structural Parameter Estimates (Equations) of Tinto's Separation Stage Formulations (Standardized Effects)

	Dependent Variables		
Independent Variables	8.	9.	10.
1. Gender	.11*	-.18*	-.06*
2. Race	.18*	-.09*	-.07*
3. Parent Income	.06*	-.09*	-.01
4. Parent Education	.00@	.04#	.06*
5. Academic Aptitude	.01	-.01	-.02
6. High School Academic Achievement	.14*	-.09*	.16*
7. Initial Institutional Commitment	-.01	.08*	-.00@
8. Support			.28*
9. Need to Reject Past Attitudes & Values			.11*
10. First- to Second-Semester Persistence			
R^2	.08*	.07*	.10*

* $p < .001$

@ beta value < .01

beta is statistically significant, but below the .05 level of meaningfulness (Land, 1969).

Results

Direct Effects

Support. Parents, other family members, and friends in the student's previous communities (i.e., family, peer groups, high school, organizations, church, neighborhood) can provide encouragement and reinforce the student's decision to attend college. This is the nature of the construct of support. In this study, four student entry characteristics -- gender, race, parent income, and high school academic achievement -- exert statistically reliable positive influences on support for college attendance. Specifically, women students (beta = .11, $p < .001$) and White/Caucasian students (beta = .18, $p < .001$) are more likely to receive support for college attendance than are male students or students who are members of racial/ethnic minority groups. In addition, as parent income rises (beta = .06. p. <.001), the support a student receives rises. Also, the greater one's record of high school academic achievement (beta = .14, $p < .001$), the greater the support experienced.

Rejection of Past Attitudes and Values. Initial institutional commitment and four of the six student entry characteristics affect, in a statistically reliable way, a student's need to reject the attitudes and values of past communities in order to remain in the chosen college. To be more specific, the greater a student's initial level of institutional commitment (beta = .08, $p < .001$), the more likely the student is to perceive a need to reject attitudes and values of past communities. In contrast, the higher a student's high school academic achievement (beta = -.09, $p < .001$) or the higher the parent income (beta = -.09, $p < .001$), the less likely is the perceived need to reject past attitudes and values. Also, women students (beta = -.18, $p < .001$) and White/Caucasian students (beta = -.09, $p < .001$) are less likely to perceive the need to reject past attitudes and values than are male students and students from racial/ethnic minority groups.

Persistence. Both support (beta = .28, $p < .001$) and the perceived need to reject past attitudes and values (beta = .11, $p < .001$) positively influence, in a statistically reliable manner, first- to second-semester persistence. Stated differently, students who receive substantial support for college attendance or who perceive a need to reject the attitudes and values of their past communities are less likely to depart from college early.

Four student entry characteristics also exert statistically significant influences on first- to second-semester persistence. High school academic achievement (beta = .16, $p < .001$) and parent education (beta = .06, $p < .001$) positively affect first- to second-semester persistence, whereas being a woman student (beta = -.06, $p < .000$) or being a White/Caucasian student (beta = -.07, $p < .000$) increases the likelihood of early departure from college.

Indirect Effects

Although the influence of high school academic achievement (beta = .03, $p < .05$) on persistence is statistically significant, the magnitude of this standardized regression coefficient falls below the .05 value considered to be meaningful by Land (1969). Thus, this indirect effect is trivial. Consequently, a table exhibiting indirect effects has not been prepared.[1]

Limitations

This study has several limitations that temper the discussion of findings, conclusions derived from the findings, and implications for practice. First, since the study used a single institution sample, the results are not necessarily generalizable to other institutional settings, except perhaps to other public, four-year institutions of similar size and selectivity. Secondly, conceptual limitations may exist regarding criticisms of the Tinto model posed by scholars such as Tierney (1992), Attinasi (1989), and Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997). A third limitation is regarding those students who initially participated in the study by completing the first instrument but who dropped out of the study thereafter. Departure from the institution for this group of students was significantly different from that of the group who remained in the study. The departure rate from Fall to Spring semester for those who dropped out of the study was 16.7%, while those remaining in the panel departed at a rate of only 8.0%. Another limitation is that the sample is slightly biased toward higher ability students, as evidenced by ACT Composite scores. Finally, this study was not able to differentiate between withdrawing students who transfer to other institutions and those who withdraw from higher education altogether. The study would provide greater insights about departure behavior if this differentiation could be made.

Discussion

As the path analysis results indicated, the factor of support had the greatest influence on the persistence/departure decision. This finding is consistent with past research regarding the importance of support. York-Anderson and Bowman (1991) concluded that higher attrition rates may occur for those who do not perceive a strong support system. Attinasi (1989) cited the importance of the influence of parents, friends, classmates, siblings, other relatives, high school teachers, and campus people. Nora and Rendon (1990) likewise found that encouragement by significant others, such as high school teachers, high school counselors, parents, other close relatives, and friends, was important to college-going behavior for community college students. Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora (1995) related support particularly to first-generation college students as they found that first-generation students reported less encouragement from their parents to attend college. Hsiao (1992), in her review of research about first-generation students and minority students, concluded that having parents, siblings, and friends with no college experience resulted in the lack of an adequate support system for the student and possibly posed an obstruction to persistence. Cabrera, Stampen, and Hansen (1990) concluded, as well, that support from significant others was positively related to persistence.

The findings of the current study also indicate that students who are members of racial/ethnic minority groups receive less support for college attendance. This is consistent with Tinto's (1993) contention that students from racial/ethnic minority groups may find separation more difficult. Also consistent with the research of Tinto is the current finding that support is less likely for students who have lower levels of high school academic achievement. Perhaps the parents, friends, and family members of low-achieving students question the likelihood of these students remaining in college.

In contrast, the findings of this study are inconsistent with Terenzini et al. (1995) and Hsiao (1992), because parent educational level in this study was not found to influence support for college attendance. However, parent income was indeed found to influence support in this study. Perhaps parent income serves as

a proxy for parent educational level, given the moderately strong correlation (r = .35, Table 3) between these two student entry characteristics. This relationship merits further study.

The path analysis results in this study also indicated that "rejection of attitudes and values" had considerable influence upon the persistence/departure decision. This finding is consistent with past research regarding the importance of the need to reject attitudes and values. Tinto (1987, 1988, 1993) contended that "rejection of attitudes and values" is central to the student's negotiation of the separation process. London (1989) noted that separation dynamics are particularly important for first-generation students, who may experience distinctive challenges in "breaking away" from past communities. Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg, and Jalomo (1994) found that for many the adaptation to college constituted a major disjunction, especially for first-generation students who were breaking, instead of carrying on, family tradition. As can be seen from this study, as well as from past research, the factor of rejection of attitudes and values is important in the separation process and ultimately in the persistence/departure decision.

Conclusions

Three primary conclusions were drawn from the findings of this study:

1. First-semester students who successfully pass through the stage of separation are more likely to return to college for their second semester. Obversely, students who are unsuccessful in negotiating this stage are more likely to withdraw early from college. The findings of this study suggest that the likelihood of successful passage through the separation stage is enhanced by students receiving support from members of their past communities. Successful passage also requires that students be willing, if necessary, to reject the attitudes and values of members of their past communities. Thus, the findings of this study provide some measure of empirical backing for Tinto's formulations regarding the stage of separation and its role in early departure of students from college.
2. Regarding the stages of passage into membership in college and university communities, the findings of this study, coupled with corroborating evidence from previous research described above, offer some support for Tinto's theoretical formulations concerning the influence of the separation stage on early

withdrawal from college. However, this study needs to be replicated in other institutional settings to further test the validity of Tinto's formulations regarding the stage of separation. Given the importance of support and preparedness to reject the attitudes and values of past communities, such replications should be conducted especially in two-year colleges and urban commuter colleges and universities. Replications also should be conducted in highly selective colleges and universities because students in these institutions may receive much support from family and friends, and college attendance may be a part of the attitudes and values of the past communities. In this type of situation, negotiation of the separation stage may be less difficult, and early withdrawal may be less likely.

3. Important components of Tinto's model of college student departure are the three stages of passage in student college careers: separation, transition, and incorporation. The current study of separation, in conjunction with other studies of the three stages, may provide a "helper theory" to serious efforts to revise Tinto's seminal 1975 theoretical formulations. Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997), in their examination of Tinto's 1975 theory, assessed the empirical support for 13 propositions derived from the theory. They concluded that only four of the propositions possessing logical consistency garner strong empirical backing. In few words, these propositions are: Student entry characteristics affect initial commitments to the institution. Initial commitments to the institution influence subsequent levels of institutional commitment. Social integration positively influences subsequent institutional commitment, which, in turn, positively affects the likelihood of student persistence in college. Social integration, nonetheless, remains unexplained by these robustly supported, logically interconnected propositions. However, social integration may be accounted for by the successful negotiation of the three stages of passage. That is, a student's sense of congruence with the social system of a college or university may be dependent on successful passage through the stages of separation, transition and incorporation. Because the findings of this study provide empirical backing regarding the role of the separation stage in influencing early withdrawal decisions from college, future attention should focus on each of the three stages of passage. An understanding of the influence of various facets of

separation, transition, and incorporation on early withdrawal from college, as well as on social integration, will impact efforts to revise Tinto's 1975 theoretical model.

Implications for Practice

This study provides meaningful implications for practice in higher education institutions. The focus of these implications is the importance of support and of rejection of attitudes and values in influencing student persistence in college. It is crucial that higher education practitioners understand how important support and rejection of attitudes and values are to student persistence. Likewise, parents, other family members, and friends should understand the importance of both of these constructs. Especially before and during the critical first semester, higher education practitioners should seek to involve parents, other family members, and friends in a variety of ways to provide assistance to students negotiating the separation process.

Orientation programs are crucial and should not be limited to a day or so prior to the beginning of the first semester but should continue throughout the freshman year (Attinasi, 1989). Also, systematic communication with parents, such as through newsletters, can give parents an understanding of the important role they play in students' success. Initiatives in residence halls and student activities should be designed to ensure development of systems that are supportive of personal values and that provide special assistance and support (Riehl, 1994). Workshops, counseling sessions, and support groups can be especially helpful (York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991; Hsiao, 1992), and approaches regarding support should be considered for use throughout the first year, if not beyond (Terenzini et al., 1995; Tinto, 1998).

Programs and other activities also should be implemented to bring future students and their parents to the campus and should be designed to involve students throughout their youth and adolescence. Periods of extended stay on campus also are helpful because they influence socialization to college-going, so that future students can "practice" going to college. Campus visitation and involvement is especially important for students from families with little or no previous college experience (Attinasi, 1989).

Administrators, faculty members, and others involved on campuses should seek to validate students early in their transition to college -- regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, age, or institution attended -- and

validate students' self-esteem by respecting and valuing who they are (Terenzini et al., 1994). Campus practitioners should be aware of the troubling nature of rejection of attitudes and values in a student's quest to persist. With some students "straddling two cultures" (London, 1989), the negotiation of rejection of attitudes and values is crucial to their success.

In the area of academic support, institutions should promote faculty awareness and understanding of the challenges that students encounter when entering college. Early warning signals to detect absenteeism and low grades may indicate that a student is having difficulty negotiating the separation stage and may help to identify students who are at risk for early departure (Riehl, 1994).

Finally, as institutional researchers study the concept of separation and its underlying dimensions, they then can help their institutions better understand the impact of separation upon departure. Survey research regarding support and rejection of attitudes and values can be used by institutional researchers to develop early warning systems to identify students who are likely to depart during their first semester. Survey questionnaires could be administered to students at entry or early in the first semester by residential advisors, academic advisors, or others who frequently observe the behavior of students. This research will have implications for specific institutional student retention efforts as well as the broader study of student persistence.

Concluding Thoughts

The development of an understanding of the role of separation in influencing early withdrawal from college serves both scholars and practitioners. The notion of separation helps account for early withdrawal from college, and from this understanding, institutional policy and programs can be developed to reduce unnecessary early departure from college.

Endnote

[1] Upon request, indirect effects estimates are available from the authors.

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